Imaging First: Maricopa County Puts Deeds on the Web

Signaling a big change in how customers access land records, Maricopa County has opened up its imaging database to the World Wide Web.

By Tod Newcombe
Associate Editor

Since the World Wide Web first wove its way into the public sector as a tool for publishing and disseminating information, county recorders have dreamed of the day when they could merge the Web with their imaging systems and allow customers to search for and retrieve images of deeds and other property documents. That day arrived this past July, when Arizona's Maricopa County started what is billed as the nation's first Web site for viewing deeds and other land-record documents.

SOLUTION SUMMARY

PROBLEM/SITUATION: Government agencies would like to use the Internet to disseminate document images of public records.

SOLUTION: Maricopa County, Ariz. is the first county in the United States allowing customers to access images of land records via the World Wide Web.

JURISDICTION: Maricopa County, Ariz.

VENDORS: FileNet Microsoft, Wall Data Inc.

CONTACT: Barbara Frerichs, project leader, 602/506-7866

The county has linked its existing imaging system for expansion and demand growing for land records in booming Phoenix, the county recorder's office had the choice of trying to squeeze more PCs into what space was left or using the untried Internet. They chose the latter.

$30,000 SERVICE ENHANCEMENT

The County Records of Deeds has been using a FileNet IMS (Image Management Services) system since 1989. Every month, as many as 90,000 new documents are scanned, indexed on a database running on an IBM AS/400 and then stored on optical discs. To create a Web service, the county installed FileNet's new Connector software, which enables Microsoft Windows NT-based Web servers to execute queries and retrieve documents from the IMS system.

Software from Wall Data Inc., allows users to query the AS/400 database on the Web. To view the images, customers must use FileNet's WebSeries Viewer, a plug-in viewer that displays TIFF (Tagged Image File Format) images and annotations that may have been added to the documents. In all, programmers spent about six weeks writing the application. "This isn't like using HTML," said Frerichs, referring to the authoring program for publishing documents on the Web. "It took a lot of effort to accomplish this."

The $30,000 service enhancement began operating on July 1 and became an immediate hit. In barely one month, more than 7,000 customers used the site to view land documents. Using a Web browser, customers can search for documents by name or by recording number. When a "hit" is displayed, the user sees a document that has had its recording information

heaters, to new homeowners. They can use the Web site to identify all the new home buyers, get their names and addresses, and then contact them." She added that should someone need an official copy of a document they see on the Web site, they can call or fax a request to the recorder's office.

TEETHING PROBLEMS

As popular as the new site has become, it does have some teething problems. Currently, a user needs a PC running Windows 95 or NT to

the near future.

Frerich also said she's not happy with the system's speed. "The downloading of the image [to the browser] takes longer than we would like to see," she commented. "We think we can improve on that."

According to Tod DeBie, FileNet's WebSeries product manager, images have to be converted into TIFF files by the FileNet software before they can appear on a browser. The step adds time to the process. Also, large documents can degrade the system's performance. He said that it's impor-